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Anatomy of a right to shelter struggle in an authoritarian regime: Dikmen Valley

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Abstract

The Covid19 pandemic has unveiled the cruciality of cities for people, not for profit. Many urban scholars and activists have long addressed the social costs driven by profitable redevelopment of urban space in an increasingly top-down manner, the most significant of which has been the mass displacement of low-income and socially marginalized people. Housing activism mobilized in areas targeted for redevelopment received broad attention as struggles against neoliberalism. Nevertheless, this focus on the market-led processes and attendant sufferings may overlook state attempts at drawing people into urban redevelopment and people's negotiations with that, as well as their contestations over exclusion. Focusing on the evolution of Dikmen Valley's right to shelter struggle within the increasingly authoritarian regime in Turkey, this update contributes to the rethinking of rights-based struggles over housing by reframing state-citizen relations, as well as challenging the priorities of the market.

Keywords

Right to shelter struggle, reclaiming citizenship, authoritarian state, Dikmen Valley

This paper discusses the right to shelter struggle mobilized by some squatter communities against a municipal-led, rigidly top-down urban redevelopment project in Dikmen Valley. Focusing on the dynamic interactions among multiple activist groups and the municipality, I will demonstrate how rights-based claims over housing play a role in reclaiming citizenship, and how housing struggles in an urban redevelopment setting are interrelated to the growingly authoritarian regime in the country. The implications of housing activism in urban redevelopment settings for state-citizen relations have been mostly overlooked due to the prioritized attention given to the excessiveness of socioeconomic inequalities driven by processes of rent appropriation, dispossession, displacement and property transfer, associated with neoliberal urban redevelopment. Thinking here about

housing policies and struggles from the perspective of remaking citizenship may, instead, provide new insights into the significance of housing activism, particularly under authoritarian regimes.

State approach to informal housing: Change or continuity?

Since the neoliberal conservative Justice and Development Party came into power in 2002, Turkey has been going through a dual transformation. It has become more committed to the expansion of neoliberal ideas into various spheres of life, which included intolerance to incompletely capitalized lands. At the same time, power has been gradually centralized through a series of legal regulations that equipped city municipalities and institutions with more decision-making power. A striking example of this has been the rendering of the Mass Housing Administration exempt from parliamentary oversight and auditing (Batuman, 2013).

Following the announcement of a national campaign for urban transformation in 2004, cities across the country have been rebuilt through large-scale state-led and -financed projects. This campaign was based on the mass demolition of squatter settlements and the resettlement of dwellers into mass housing units constructed mostly in the peripheries of the cities while more central areas with better infrastructure were reserved for the more affluent. This seemed to be a divergence from the populist policies of the previous decades. Informal settlements in cities were initially managed through excusing their expansion as their dwellers provided a cheap labour force and political support. Later, by enabling people to make profits out of ‘illegally occupied’ lands, the authorities sought to cultivate profit-seeking behaviour. These policies and official tolerance and exploitation of ‘illegality’ for political benefit paved the way for marginalization of rights-based claims over housing and land.

Beyond being the main actor implementing urban redevelopment projects, state actors have also been active in inviting the people, including the most directly targeted squatter dwellers, into the process. This was consistent with the extension of neoliberal ambition to remake citizens, as well as cities (Uitermark et al., 2007; Paton, 2014, 2018). The Turkish government sought to align the aspirations of squatter dwellers who have been socially and spatially excluded with the profit logic of the market, in this case, by transforming them into owners of mass housing units financed by state-subsidized mortgage credits.

This is a crucial but mostly overlooked aspect of state involvement in this process, where housing (or promising to house) socially and spatially marginalized groups in formal apartments was also part of a project meant to incite residents’ desire to become part of the new Turkey being constructed. By mobilizing discourses of globalization and modernization, and empowering state institutions with financial and legal power to undertake large scale projects, the state represented itself as a strong and benevolent authority. It offered its citizens, including the most directly targeted squatter dwellers, higher living standards in new build, ‘modern’ apartments and the propriety associated with that. This, in turn, helped represent alternative and/or opposing voices and claims (over housing and land) as obstacles preventing the country’s progress and thus deserving of punishment. Thus, urban redevelopment helped the state promote the notion of obedient citizen and benevolent state,

which is in accordance with, and a marker of, the increasingly authoritarian nature of the regime (Yardımcı, 2020).

State-imposed urban redevelopment paving the way for the right to shelter mobilization

One of the earliest examples of this process was the Dikmen Valley right to shelter struggle organized by some squatter communities who lacked title deeds against a municipal-led urban redevelopment project. This was one of the largest squatter settlements in a central locality in the capital (less than one kilometre far from the Grand National Assembly). The potential rental gains were of direct interest to the local state in the initial phases of neoliberal urbanization in the early 1980s. The first mass housing and urban development project in the country was later introduced there in 1989. The purpose of the municipality was to recreate the area as a public park and resettle the squatter dwellers in ‘modern’ apartment buildings. Initially, representatives of the municipal developer company organized periodic face-to-face meetings with rights-holders to communicate the terms of the redevelopment project. Over time, these goals and methods were significantly revised in accordance with the broader pattern of consolidation of neoliberal urbanisation in the country. The density of construction in the valley increased vis-à-vis municipal and green areas and the principle of participation was completely abolished.

It was in 2006 when the greater municipality of Ankara, with extended decision-making powers granted after a series of legal regulations, unilaterally announced the project in the fourth and fifth phases of the Valley. Notices were sent to the squatter dwellers lacking title deeds to evacuate their houses in two weeks and sign the contracts whose terms were set by the municipality. There was no place for negotiation. Those holding legal title deeds (provided through Amnesty laws enacted in the 1980s) were eligible to get housing from the valley, under certain unfavourable financial terms provided by the municipality. Those lacking title deeds, on the other hand, were given the offer of purchasing land in Dogukent (10 km to the east of the valley) to build housing on. However, there was no infrastructure in that area and no information about the exact site to be settled.

Nearly 3,000 squatter dwellers, half of whom lacked title deeds, had known that their lands were going to be targeted in the next wave of urban transformations taking place at that time. What was unexpected and unwelcome was the short eviction notices, the absence of negotiation and the associated uncertainties and indebtedness. Almost all the title-deed holders signed the contract and left the valley whereas those lacking legal title deeds found themselves in limbo, squeezed between facing forced eviction and defying the local state. Out of this uncertainty, a few households came forward and started gathering to discuss whether anything could be done to negotiate better terms for their inclusion in the project. Initially this group was formed by left leaning individuals and families, who were more confident about radical activism.

The squatter community was composed of new migrants as well as more established ones. People from the same hometowns and religious or ethnic backgrounds resided close to one another, with interaction across such boundaries usually absent. There were also political cleavages between Alevi residents, who were more left-leaning, and Sunni groups that tended to be more submissive to the state authority. Some people from the latter group showed explicit dissent towards attempts at collective mobilization around housing and a right to shelter. The tension became explicit during home visits undertaken by activists to inform people about their rights and calling on them to act together, as they were insulted, and some doors slammed in their faces.

Until then, the squatter settlers did not have legal claims over housing, had been stigmatized as being culturally 'inferior' vis-à-vis the 'urbanity' associated with the dwellers of multiple-storey apartment buildings, and had mainly relied on populist policies that enabled them to illegally construct (and later make a profit on) squatter houses in return for political support. The latter helped them survive in the city, but also disguised the incapacity of the state to meet their housing rights or needs and instigated obedient behaviour as a way of maintaining political support. This aligned with the mainstream political culture in Turkey. Accordingly, the state is accepted as the main authority to set the common good and bring progress to society, and citizens are expected to obey state authority and policies, which in turn marginalizes political activism as a form of rights-claiming (See Caymaz, 2007; Kadioğlu, 2008).

On a snowy winter day in February 2007, the Dikmen Valley became a setting where this notion was revived in the ways urban redevelopment was framed and promoted by the ruling. That day the dwellers woke up at dawn to see their neighbourhood surrounded by demolition teams accompanied by over 5,000 anti-riot officers. They targeted the houses of seven individuals said to be leading figures in the mobilization. The police attacked with pepper gas and water cannons throughout the day and 14 people were taken into custody. No demolitions were carried out, which suggests that it was more about deterring people from being engaged with activism by showing them the forceful price of exclusion from the 'benevolence' of the state.

Nine years after that day, in 2015, I did ethnographic fieldwork involving semi-structured and unstructured interviews and participant observation in Dikmen Valley. I saw that people's memories were very fresh still, expressed with strong feelings of frustration, resentment and anger. A group of women I interviewed likened what happened that day to Israeli soldiers attacking the Palestinian people. They were conscious that it was not only about the capital remaking urban space, but the state remaking citizenship. In the aftermath of that day, the local state cut off public buses and gradually stopped maintenance of roads in the neighbourhood. Despite being insulting and shocking, these actions heartened, if not revolutionized, some of the initially hesitant squatter dwellers and incited their desire to go to the *Right to Shelter Bureau*. A few households who opposed the municipality's imposition of the redevelopment project turned an abandoned squatter house in the centre of the neighbourhood (see Figure 1) into a place where the dwellers would meet regularly, get informed about the process, discuss what to do and make decisions collectively.

**Figure 1**

The Right to Shelter Bureau in Dikmen Valley, which is a prefab including a common room where all documents, files, newspaper news are saved along with a kitchen, 31 May 2015. **Source: Author.**

Individual housing claims and collective weekly meetings in the *Right to Shelter Bureau* paved the way for interactions between squatter dwellers who had traditionally been hostile or competitive with one another due to diverse ethnic, religious, hometown backgrounds. Many of the people I spoke with in the field told me that the struggle enabled them to meet and interact with neighbours they did not know before. This divergence from the past was expressed by Haydar, a leading activist, who told me that ‘during the right to shelter struggle, we learned that we were persons, we were citizens’ (Interview, 20 March 2015). He explained that this feeling replaced ‘clientelism, localism and religious sectarianism’ which had separated the squatter communities through hostile relationships before.

The Bureau also established networks with other right to shelter struggles visiting activists in Ankara and other cities, inviting them over by organising annual valley festivals, concerts, film screenings and workshops in the neighbourhood. Through these interactions many dwellers discovered that there was another way other than being an obeying subject in nepotistic/populist relationships with local authorities and competing with their neighbours for political patronage. What was striking in Haydar’s words was the transformative power of rights-claiming, and the redefinition of citizenship with reference to that. This was broader than being equally worthy of living in ‘modern’, ‘decent’ apartments, as the state promised them. On the contrary, through claiming right to shelter, the squatter dwellers lacking legal documents redefined their relations with the state authority and policies, deriving empowerment from becoming rights-claimants, deciding their own future in the city, in their desired terms.

Eroding power of rights-claiming

When I first visited the Dikmen Valley Right to Shelter Bureau in January 2015, I saw a squatter neighbourhood full of deteriorated houses and roads (see Figure 2) and a community

exhausted and fragmented. This was three years after the 2012 declaration made by the increasingly authoritarian Turkish state that Dikmen Valley was a risky area based on Law no 6303, infamously used to delegitimize opposition and enable central state institutions to take full authority in enforcing urban transformation projects in so-called ‘risky’ areas. Following that designation, the metropolitan municipality pushed the right to shelter struggle further towards radicalization (and, thus, de-legitimization) by actively stigmatizing the struggling groups in the media and frequently intervening with anti-riot police.

Consequently, and to avoid the stigma that could limit their children’s futures, many families had become more inclined to move out of the neighbourhood. In 2015, more than half of the dwellers lacking title deeds had moved out to apartments purchased using cheap credits. The restructuring of the mortgage market accompanying the urban transformation projects enabled many low-income families with members over working age to become homeowners. The change in tenure status from squatter dwellers lacking legal title deeds to legal apartment owners meant that the individual security of legal homeownership overwhelmed the empowerment derived from the collective right-claiming. As for the people still residing in the neighbourhood, only seven households had not purchased an apartment elsewhere.

Over the years, the void caused by people abandoning the movement enabled a left-wing political organization called the People’s Houses (PH) to become more active in the movement. While I was in the field, two members of the PH, one of whom was also a long-lasting resident in the neighbourhood, were leading the ongoing negotiations with the municipality. This organization had already supported the activists from the beginning of the mobilization, providing them guidance in processes of filing a legal action against the municipality, and mobilizing people to provide maintenance and security in the absence of local state services. Drawing on existing networks among civil society organizations, housing

Figure 2

The main road that extended along the neighbourhood (on the left), and a few squatter houses on the side. Note the deterioration on the right hand-side of the road and the roof of the house, 8 February 2015.
Source: Author.



activists, academics, university youth groups and lawyers, the PH also enabled engagement with a broader community beyond the neighbourhood. But, as more people moved out from the neighbourhood and the PH's explicitly anti-neoliberal and anti-government activism agenda took hold, it also created disharmony within the community.

Many dwellers were still far from being revolutionaries, especially within the framework of intensified state stigmatization of opposition. During the weekly meetings, initially attended by around 30 participants, the leading activist from the PH made a presentation to inform dwellers about the ongoing negotiations with the municipality. He also talked about the importance and righteousness of their struggle vis-à-vis global capitalist forces and their profit-seeking policies, which were also underlying the project in the valley. Yet the participants listened quietly. The questions and concerns they raised were much more practical and local, concerning the negotiations and the terms of a potential agreement with the municipality. During one of his speeches, the leading activist said 'we are undertaking a class struggle here', upon which one male participant who appeared to be in his fifties commented saying 'yes, indeed, we defend the poor people'. The way he 'softened' the words was underpinned by insecurities about radical activism, as the municipality was pushing them to either accept its terms or be declared as criminals. In a similar vein, many activists that spoke to me about their engagement with activism referred to state violence and corruption, rather than their capacity to claim denied rights. In doing so, they were attempting to justify their 'misbehaviour', that is, political opposition, and render acceptable their claims over housing by turning the attention to the violent and corrupt state. This revealed the anxieties driven by the growing authoritarianism and the shrinking power of rights-based claims.

Moreover, some of my interviewees referred to their 'nativity' when claiming their rights to shelter. When criticizing the inequalities driven by recent housing policies, one of the leading activists Aysel said that '[the Mayor of Ankara] allowed foreigners to become residents in Turkey while trying to take our houses from us' (Interview, 1 February 2015). Similarly, when complaining about the societal consent for the demolition of squatter settlements, another female activist Kardelen responded saying 'OK, let them demolish but where will these *Turkish people* go? Where will the Turkish citizens go?' (Interview, 22 February 2015, emphasis added). Their appeal to their 'Turkishness' disclosed the eroding power of the collective right to shelter struggle. Without the power derived from rights claiming, the community became fragmented, exhausted and frustrated. The shared feeling among the committed activists was that even if the municipality agreed to resettle them within the valley, it would not compensate what they went through over their nine-year struggle.

Conclusion

Housing struggles are shaped and transformed within the broader political and socio-economic context within which they are embedded. Claims over housing and land are important not only in disclosing and resisting the injustices driven by neoliberal urban policies, but also in providing prospects to reclaim citizenship in authoritarian regimes. The

Dikmen Valley right to shelter struggle transformed a disconnected and heterogeneous group of informal squatter dwellers, most of whom were traditionally compliant with the state authority, into a mobilized, rights-claiming community whose struggle made an impact beyond the boundaries of the neighbourhood. This is also the reason why they were directly targeted by the state authorities in their attempts at forming an obedient, as well as profitable, citizenry. In between the anti-rights approach of the market, the anti-insurgency policies of the state, and an explicitly anti-government agenda of the left-wing activists, the transformative power of rights-claiming eroded. Nevertheless, far from being a pessimistic case of fading activism, the Dikmen Valley case should be a reminder of the implications of housing struggles for reclaiming citizenship and remaking citizens as well as the overlapping, temporally shifting boundaries of ‘appropriate’ and ‘worthy’ city dwellers and nationals.

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